

Where Does Your Food Come From?

By Kathiann M. Kowalski

Local VS. Long-Distance—Does It Matter?

Before you know it, spring will be on the way and more fresh fruits and veggies will be in stores. But what about the fresh fruits and vegetables we see in the stores right now? Where do those foods come from? Locally grown foods are a great choice when they're available, but are they really always better?

Why Buy Local?

Taste is the reason Ohio teen Allie M. says she prefers locally grown peaches to ones that might travel more than a thousand miles to the supermarket. "They have to pick them so unripe to ship them, so they don't spoil," says Allie. "They're not as good as they would be if you went to the farmers market during peak season and bought fresh peaches."

When fruits and vegetables taste better, you'll probably eat them more often. That's good, because the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends filling half your plate with fruits and vegetables.

While there's no clear definition of what's local, most shoppers agree that produce grown nearby is fresher than foods that travel long distances.

Local foods can be more nutritious too. "The longer it takes for a food to go from the field to your plate, the more it may deteriorate in terms of nutrient content," explains Mary Lee Chin, a registered dietitian at Nutrition Edge Communications in Denver. "But a lot of it depends on many different factors." Soil conditions, fertilization practices, irrigation methods, and the specific plant varieties can all affect nutrient content.

"Handling is really critical," adds Chin. That includes everything that happens from harvest until foods reach your home. When fruits and vegetables are at peak ripeness and handled properly, the results can be both delicious and nutritious. But bruised, wilted, or overripe produce loses both appeal and nutrient value.

Buying local foods also lets shoppers support the local economy. That builds feelings of community. "You know who grows your food," says Allie.

Local farmers markets may spotlight produce that an area is famous for, such as Michigan cherries or Georgia peaches. You might also discover varieties not usually carried by supermarkets, such as some heirloom tomatoes or fresh herbs.

Some vendors sell only "organic" foods. Organic produce usually isn't more nutritious than other fruits and vegetables. To receive official certification, farms follow specific guidelines, such as not using certain pesticides or fertilizers. (Some farms don't go through the certification process but still may produce food according to organic practices.)

Energy usage is another environmental issue. Local foods travel a shorter distance to market, so less fuel is required to deliver the food. However, notes Chin, the type of transportation matters. For a 100-mile trip, for instance, a typical pickup truck uses more than 10 times the fuel per pound carried than a full semitrailer. Farming practices, water usage, and other factors affect foods' environmental impact too.

Variety Is the Spice of Life

Not all our favorite foods can come from local farms. Allie loves bananas, but they don't grow in Ohio. And forget about finding fresh Ohio-grown melons, strawberries, or peaches during winter.

"In my opinion, it's not possible to have the lifestyle we enjoy and rely only on locally grown foods," says Trevor Suslow, an agricultural scientist at the University of California, Davis. "In order to enjoy a year-round supply of healthful, nutritious, good-tasting, enjoyable diverse foods, they are being grown, harvested, and then shipped tens of thousands of miles." Refrigerated storage and transport make it possible.

Don't rule out frozen, canned, or dried fruits and vegetables. Many companies run processing plants close to farms for cost and efficiency reasons. Other benefits are more obvious to the consumer. Not only are the nutrients of fresh fruits preserved, says Chin, but sensory qualities of appearance, smell, and taste remain too. A jar of applesauce serves many people and delivers almost the same health benefits per serving as fresh apples—that's something to consider when money is tight.

The Bottom Line

While local foods aren't always better than long-distance ones, one thing is clear: "Research has shown that people who eat the highest amount of fruits and vegetables simply have healthier diets," says Chin. You can get those health benefits "no matter how they're produced."

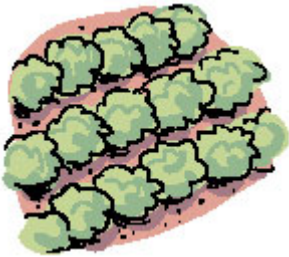
Food safety is also an issue regardless of where foods come from. Recent government recalls involved a wide range of foods, including fresh strawberries, organic spinach, packaged salads, papayas, bean burgers, cheese, and herring.

"Contaminated food can look and smell and taste completely normal," warns Dr. Karen Neil at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Symptoms of illness may not appear for days.

To protect yourself, always follow safe food handling and storage practices. After all, no matter where your food starts out, it ends up with you.

Follow That Food!

More than two weeks can pass before food from the field finally finds its way to your home. Consider how lettuce might get from a California farm to a Boston supermarket.



From the field to a nearby cooling facility (1–2 days)

Dave Clegg



Onto a truck to a packaging and distribution center (1–2 days)

Dave Clegg



Packaging or processing (1–2 days)

Dave Clegg



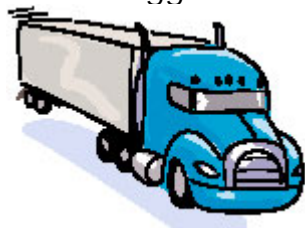
Onto a truck to go across the country (5–7 days)

Dave Clegg



To a regional distribution center (1–2 days)

Dave Clegg



To another truck for delivery to a local supermarket (1 day)

Dave Clegg



On the supermarket shelves until purchase (1–4 days)

Dave Clegg

Cook It Safe!

Frozen food may spend days traveling so you can quickly “nuke” it when you’re ready. But be sure you’re doing it safely. Diane Van of the U.S. Department of Agriculture offers these tips for safe microwaving:

Know whether to use the microwave or the conventional oven. Not all frozen foods can be cooked safely in the microwave.

Know your microwave wattage before microwaving food. Lower-wattage ovens need more cooking time.

Read and follow cooking instructions. That includes waiting the full standing time listed on a package after the item comes out of the oven to ensure it's done cooking.

Always use a food thermometer to ensure a safe internal temperature. Grill marks or browning may make food appear cooked before it really is.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the passage, approximately how many buildings and vehicles would lettuce have to go through on the trip between a California farm and a Boston supermarket?

- A three buildings and three trucks
- B seven buildings and three trucks
- C four buildings and five trucks
- D three buildings and five trucks

2. Which of the following is an argument presented against buying local fruits and vegetables?

- A Local foods travel a shorter distance to market.
- B Local farmers may spotlight a produce that an area is famous for.
- C Local produce is fresher than foods that travel long distances.
- D Local farms cannot produce all of our favorite foods all year.

3. Which of the following actions would help a person avoid getting sick from contaminated produce?

- A washing produce before eating
- B smelling produce before eating to make sure it is safe
- C cooking produce until it feels hot to the touch
- D eating only food from a local farmer that the person knows

4. " 'The longer it takes for a food to go from the field to your plate, the more it may deteriorate in terms of nutrient content,' explains Mary Lee Chin."

As used in the sentence, deteriorate most nearly means

- A to improve
- B to recover
- C to get worse
- D to adjust

5. This passage deals primarily with

- A the local vs. long-distance food debate
- B the ways to keep your food safe
- C the length of time it takes to get lettuce from the farm
- D the best procedure for using the microwave